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ABSTRACT

Every school day, hundreds of West Virginia children ride school buses much longer than state guidelines say they should. Under those guidelines, no elementary student should be on the bus more than 30 minutes one way, middle school students 45 minutes, and high school students 1 hour. In fall 1999, public hearings about school transportation times were held in four counties: Preston, Webster, Ritchie, and Lincoln. In three of these counties, most community schools have been closed or consolidated, and over half of the students ride buses in excess of state guidelines. During the past 10 years, over a fourth of West Virginia's public schools have been closed in the name of efficiency, and the state of West Virginia operates the most expensive transportation system in the nation, based on cost per pupil and cost per mile. Testimony at the hearings suggests that the people paying the highest price for the state policy supporting fewer schools and longer bus rides are some of the state's youngest citizens from its poorest families. Testimony from parents and students described wasted time, huge wasted portions of human lives spent on school buses; children too tired to perform well in school or to pursue higher-level work; children left out of extracurricular activities and accompanying benefits; and lost family time that affects family relationships. Testimony also addressed the health and safety of children during long, sometimes hazardous, bus rides and examined the myth that school consolidation would result in greater class offerings. Facts from a state-sponsored transportation study are listed. (SV)

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Long School Bus Rides

Jim Balow photo

Stealing the Joy of Childhood

A Challenge West Virginia document
written by
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A thank you from Challenge WV

Challenge West Virginia would like to thank those people who helped make possible our public hearings on school bus travel times for children.

Those who organized the public hearings include Jana Freeman of Preston County; Cindy Miller and Amelia Anderson of Webster County; Thomas Ramey and Gwen Ramey of Lincoln County; and Patty Deak and Terri Weiford of Ritchie County.

We are grateful to those people who listened to the stories told by students and parents, including Arvin Harsh and Ron Freeman of Preston County; Carol Warren of Webster County and the West Virginia Council of Churches; and Ken Reed of Webster County.

Above all, we want to thank the parents and children who shared the stories of how their lives are affected by long school bus rides.

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Long School Bus Rides

Bruce Roberts photo

Every school day hundreds of West Virginia children ride school buses much longer than state guidelines say they should.

Under those guidelines, no elementary student is supposed to be on a bus more than 30 minutes one way; middle school students 45 minutes and high school students one hour.

In the fall of 1999 Challenge West Virginia conducted public hearings about school transportation times in four counties — Preston, Webster, Ritchie and Lincoln. In Webster, Preston and Ritchie counties, a majority of community schools have been closed or consolidated. As a result, more than half the students in these counties ride buses in excess of state guidelines.

During the past ten years, more than a fourth of West Virginia's public schools (323 schools) have been closed. State officials say this has been necessary because small schools are not efficient to operate.

Although there is no evidence that proves large schools do indeed save taxpayers money, one fact is not in dispute: **the State of West Virginia operates the most expensive transportation system in the nation.** This fact was documented in a study conducted by an independent firm on behalf of the West Virginia Department of Education.

Testimony at Challenge WV's hearings suggest that the people who are paying the highest price for the state policy supporting fewer schools and longer bus rides are some of our state's youngest citizens from some of our state's poorest families.

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2 The Smallest Passengers

The little girl is five years old, a kindergarten student in Ritchie County. She gets up at 5:30 a.m. and boards a school bus at about 6:30 a.m. The bus arrives at her elementary school about 30 minutes later, but she can't get off. She and her sister, a second grader, ride around the Ritchie County back roads for 20 to 25 minutes more because there are no teachers on duty at the school when the bus first arrives. They finally get to school no earlier than 7:15 a.m.

The girls' brother, who is in middle school, gets off the bus when it makes its first pass of the elementary school. With their parents' permission, he and a classmate wait unsupervised until another bus picks them up to go on to the middle school.

"You have to wait at the school forever," he said. "I get really tired. Sometimes I wait at the elementary school 30, 35 minutes. I just sit there." The boys don't arrive at their middle school until about 7:45.

The Ritchie County boys are on the bus 65 to 70 minutes each morning, well in excess of state guidelines concerning school bus transportation. This doesn't count the time they wait at the elementary school.

The bus times for the little girls also exceed state guidelines that say no elementary student should be on a bus more than 30 minutes one way. Transportation for middle school students should take no longer than 45 minutes one way and high school students should arrive at school no more than an hour after boarding the bus.

'The busing hours are too long. When I get to school, I'm just knocked out.'

– Preston County third grader

In the afternoon, the little girls sit in a school gymnasium for more than an hour after their classes are over before getting on the bus for a 45 to 50-minute ride home. The children who left home at 6:30 a.m. get back to their mother at about 4:30 or 4:45 — completing a school day of ten hours.

"The busing hours are too long," a Preston County third grader said. "When I get to school, I'm just knocked out. You're halfway asleep. Teachers hate it because you're passing out in the middle of tests. At lunch, your head is halfway in your food."

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The high school experience 3

A high school student in Webster County has a daily commute of at least two hours each way, a trip that takes much longer when the weather is bad and road conditions treacherous. He leaves his home at 6:30 a.m. and doesn't arrive home until after 5 p.m.

The young man boards a school bus at 6:45 and arrives at the local elementary school about 15 minutes later. He waits for 15 to 20 minutes there before getting on a bus headed for the high school, which is an hour away.

"We have a bus transfer in Webster which takes a while, so I'm on the bus a total of about an hour and 15 minutes or an hour and 20 minutes in the morning," he said. That time does not include the layover times at the elementary school and at Webster Springs. A detour up a back road in the afternoon means his evening commute is between an hour and a half to an hour and 45 minutes.

'One of the first things I learned was not how to read and write, but how to put chains on the back of the bus.'

– Webster County parent

"You have to take into consideration the weather on the mountains," the young man said. "To go to high school now we have to cross three major mountains and the weather is pretty bad on all of them, especially on snowy days." One day last winter when road conditions were bad, it took the bus two hours to get to the high school from the elementary school, he said.

Another high school student said his normal bus ride is just under two hours one way but that he has been on the bus five hours round trip when the weather was bad.

A Preston County parent said two times last year her high school senior had been picked up and was on his way to school, only to be brought back when the driver learned school had been closed.

A parent who made the same bus trips when he was in high school in the 1980s observed, "One of the first things I learned was not how to read and write, but how to put chains on the back of the bus. That's the first class you get. You help the bus driver."

Forget extra-curricular activities

"We used to have a lot of high schools around here. A lot of boys played ball against each other and the games were nearby so the whole community could go to them," a Preston County resident said. "Now the schools are big, not very many kids get to play and the games are so far away that nobody can go."

The parent of a teenage boy in that county said her son participated in track events that were two hours away from the high school. He often did not get home until 3 a.m. on school nights.

That this young man participated at all made him an exception. A majority of students who live in communities great distances from their high schools said they had given up on trying to be involved in extra-curricular activities. "I don't have time for athletics," a Webster County student said. "I love to play baseball and stuff like that. I just can't fit it in."

A Ritchie County mother said her son, the only student from their community who even tried to play sports, had to quit the football and wrestling teams because of the distance and transportation problems.

A Preston County parent who graduated from high school in the 1980s said she had to

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quit playing basketball because her family couldn't provide transportation. "I basically was left out," she said.

A Webster County parent described his athletic career with great sadness. "As I was growing up, one of the greatest things I thought there was in school was athletics," he said. He said playing ball at his elementary school, which went through eighth grade, was an experience that greatly enriched his life."When I went off to high school I still wanted to play, but economics and feasibility wouldn't allow it because of the great distance to travel from my house. So I did not get to participate in sports or any extra-curricular activity in high school."

A Webster County student said she had only been able to attend one dance in her high school career. "I had 15 minutes to get ready, curl my hair and everything before I had to be back over there. (When I was in grade school) I went to every dance. I played every sport. I was a cheerleader, played basketball, softball. Last year I tried to play softball and had to quit because of the ride."

A Preston County high school student decided against playing soccer because she didn't want to spend her summer making the long trip for practices. "If I make the basketball team, I won't be getting home until 7 or 7:30. I'll ride the activities bus," she said.

The student had been in band since fifth grade. "I quit this year because they had so many practices after school that you were required to be at and you wouldn't be getting home till late. A lot of their practices started in the summer like soccer did, and I didn't want to give up my summer to be running around the roads, going to Preston High, coming back."

A Ritchie County parent said that when his county had two small high schools, each school had between 75 and 80 students participating in the band. "So they told us when they consolidated, we'd have 140 in the band. It didn't work that way. There are 33 kids in the Ritchie County High School Band."

"I basically was left out," a Preston County woman said of her high school years.

No time for Family Values

A high school junior from Webster County says he has almost no family life as a result of his long bus rides and a school day that extends more than ten hours. The student leaves home at 6:30 a.m. and does not arrive back until after 5 p.m., an experience which he says is typical for high school students in his community.

"I leave a long time before my father goes to work," he said. "His shift starts at 3 o'clock. I'm still in school when he starts work and I don't get home until after 5 o'clock when he's already at work. He doesn't get in until 11 o'clock so the only time I have with my father is on weekends."

When the young man arrives home from school, his father and stepmother have already eaten, so he finds whatever leftovers or snacks he can fix for himself. Family dinner time is not a reality for him and his family.

"If I want to do something, I normally have to leave a note for my father to read when he gets in. So he reads the note while I'm in bed and returns the message. When I get up in the morning, I find out what he told me so we never really get to discuss it."

A classmate said he boards the bus at 6:15 and doesn't get home in the afternoon until after 5. "By the time I get home, supper's already in little dishes ready to go in the refrigerator. Everybody's already eaten."

A young woman from Webster County said she, too, takes care of herself when she gets home from school. In order for family members to attend weekday church services and events at the grade school, the family dinner hour must be sacrificed.

"Everybody else has already eaten dinner and half the time nobody's at home," she said. "I have to go in and find something to cook and cook it and fend for myself, do my homework and everything. By the time I do that it's about ten till eight. I usually have about an hour of homework. Then I go to bed because I'm exhausted."

Her schedule has affected her relationship with her parents, she said. "I don't really get along with my mother all that well because I never get to talk to her. I never see my dad at all."

'There's not going to be any family value if you don't have any time to spend with your family'

- Webster County student

A Preston County parent said. "If your kids are involved in sports or extra-curricular activities after school, there is no home life. Home's a place where you wave at each other when you're going by."

A Webster County parent said. "We hear it takes a village to raise a child. But parents cannot travel the additional miles to stay involved in schools and their children's activities. These parents are not going to volunteer or attend activities at a distant school."

Added a Preston County parent. "They talk a lot about an equal education and how much more advantages our children will have once they are bused to these large schools. In my opinion, they're discriminated against by that bus ride and that lack of rest and food and nutrition and time with family."

A high school student put the matter succinctly. "There's not going to be any family value if you don't have any time to spend with your family," he said.

6 Health and Safety of Children

Parents and students related stories of school bus travel over hazardous roads, of dangerous disciplinary situations, of students who were tired in school and at home, of students who didn't get to school in time to eat a school breakfast.

"There was this one instance last year when the road conditions were pretty bad and it took us two hours to get to school," a Webster County high school student said. "We were an hour and twenty minutes late getting to high school. We got there halfway into the second block. We already missed the first block and we had to make up that day."

Road conditions vary in different parts of counties, said a Webster County parent who also made the long commute when she was in high school in the 1980s. "The weather can be beautiful, we can get halfway to school and (hit) a blinding snowstorm and slick roads."

'My daughters were telling me a boy brought spray perfume on the bus and sprayed the bus seat with it before he lit it on fire so that the alcohol would make a better blaze'

- Preston County mother

A Preston County high school student recounted incidents that put a bus load of students at risk. "I've seen people light fires on the bus, have matches and cigarette lighters. I've seen people cut seats on the bus, fight on the bus, stick metal objects in the heater at the back of the bus. A lot of things happen on the bus that the bus driver doesn't realize."

A Preston County parent told a variation of the same story. "My daughters were telling me about a boy that brought spray perfume on the bus and sprayed the bus seat with it before he lit it on fire so that the alcohol would make a better blaze. That scares the living daylights out of a parent to think that children are starting that kind of fire on the bus when your child is on there."

A Logan County parent who testified at the Lincoln County hearing said when she asked her child's bus driver why he was driving so fast she was told he was being pushed "from above" to get the kids on and off the buses as quickly as he possibly could.

And then there are the children who get sick or have accidents on the bus. "There have been times that children have thrown up on the bus," said a parent who endured that situation when she was a high school student. "You don't have a choice. You have to go to school so you smell like vomit all day and you weren't even the one that got sick. We've had wet pants and in a lot of cases, parents couldn't afford to ride clear to the high school to take a change of clothes in."

A Webster County parent who made the two-hour bus trips when he was in high school in the1980s said he didn't remember a morning when students from his community arrived at school in time to eat a school breakfast.

Another parent agreed. "The cafeteria doors were shut when we got there," she said.

A high school student said that is still true. " Especially if the weather conditions are bad and you're late to class. They don't have make-up breakfasts when the bus is late so you have to go through your day until lunch without food."

The myth of greater class offerings

"There's a myth you get a better education here," said a Webster County student.

But he and his classmates say they avoid higher level classes because they don't have time to do the required homework. "I'm just involved in the basic classes it takes to get out of high school."

A parent who attended the same high school offered an explanation. "The more advanced classes you take in high school, the more homework you have that evening. So you bring home five or six courses of homework in the evening and you're getting home at 6 or 6:30 anyway, it kind of depresses you and you don't have that zeal the following year to go the next step."

Added a student, "I don't want to take any hard courses, because I'm too exhausted. My brain would basically be fried."

'I don't want to take any hard courses, because I'm too exhausted. My brain would basically be fried.'

– Webster County student

Another parent told of trying to help his daughter with higher level math. "She'd fall asleep," he said. "It was 8 o'clock and she was already gone. I'd tell her to get up at 5 and work from 5 to 5:30 and then get ready to go off to school. It was a hard thing to watch as a parent. They were like zombies. They'd walk in tired and short-tempered. The only good thing about being home is that they were off the bus."

A Ritchie County parent who graduated from a small high school before the schools were consolidated said while he's not prepared to compare specific class listings, he can say with certainty that there are no more higher math or science classes than were available when he was in school.

Some distance learning classes start before the students get to school, they say. "Some of the classes start at 8 o'clock," said a Webster County student. "We're not going to be able to participate in those because we don't get there soon enough."

A Preston County mother said in order for her son to get the classes he needed for college, he had to ride to an academic center. This meant he only got three hours of classes each day — the rest of his school day was spent waiting for or riding a bus.

A Webster County student talked about vocational classes, which he would like to take, but which involve even more travel. "At the vo tech school you can get automotive and advanced metals, forestry, electronics classes. That's another hour from the high school. I plan to take forestry next year which means that I'll be on a bus . . . five and a half hours on a good day without any weather hazards."

A parent recalled her own days at Webster County High School. "I graduated as a senior second in my class and I avoided all the college prep classes. I went on to college and graduated. I was on the Dean's List," she said. "But you avoid those courses and a lot of it is just the homework. You get home in the evenings and get your chores done, you just didn't want any more homework than necessary. And we were all very capable of taking those courses. It wasn't too mentally challenging. It was just there was no time for the homework."

8 The cost for children and families

Some parents and students tried to quantify the value of the time spent on school buses.

A Webster County mother who attended the consolidated Webster County High School estimated that from the time she left home in the morning until she returned in the afternoon, she had spent 32 percent of her time on a school bus. She does not want her own daughters to repeat her experience.

"I think I had figured it out that the four years I was in high school, I was on the bus approximately 2,160 hours," she said. "If you break that down, I think it's 54 forty-hour work weeks. So anybody in the work force would've had to work a whole year on that job to compensate for the time that I spent on the bus and there were a lot of kids on that bus a half hour longer each way than I was."

A parent and former teacher said his kids determined that they spent more time on the school bus than in the classroom during their high school careers.

'she went more than the distance around the world two times'

– Webster County parent

Another Webster parent said her daughter calculated her bus experience a different way. "She figured out that traveling to and from the high school for four years, she went more than the distance around the world two times. That doesn't count the times she came home and went back to games. That was just regular everyday."

A Preston County parent did some calculations for the entire county, assuming that 500 out of 1600 students spend at least two hours a day on school buses (which those at the public hearing said was a conservative estimate).

"If each student who rides two hours or more is paid $5.50 per hour, that works out to $990 each year. With 500 students, that works out to $495,000 — almost half a million bucks. Our children's time has got to be worth something."

Parents and students alike described wasted time, huge wasted portions of human lives spent on school buses. They told of children who got sick, children who were so tired they couldn't perform well in school, children who avoided higher level classes because they didn't have the energy to do the required work.

They spoke of children who didn't have the opportunity to develop teamwork skills or leadership skills that are a by-product of extra-curricular activities, children who simply felt left out because they couldn't participate in sports or band or dances.

They spoke of children who awoke before dawn and arrived home after dark, as if referring to a throwback to the early industrial era when children worked long hours in factories and coal mines.

They spoke of the loss of family time, the inability to eat together or work together on the family farm. They spoke of relationships that suffered because of long hours eaten up by transportation times.

They spoke of childhoods lost and dreams aborted as their children grow wearier and wearier of the tedious and sometimes dangerous trips they face day after day after day on yellow school buses.

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Facts from the State-sponsored transportation study

MGT of America, with corporate offices in Tallahassee, Florida, was retained by the West Virginia Department of Education, Office of Transportation and Facilities, to conduct an examination of pupil transportation in the state. It was completed in 1998.

Among MGT's findings:

1. West Virginia operates the most expensive transportation program in the country based on cost per pupil and cost per mile.

2. Total estimated statewide pupil transportation costs in 1997-98 were $130.4 million.

3. Almost 2,800 bus drivers in West Virginia drove students almost 40 million miles in 1997-98.

4. In 1997-98, 513 accidents involving school transportation occurred in West Virginia.

5. The allowance for transportation costs was increased in 1998 by HB 4306 from 80 percent of actual transportation expenditures to 85 percent.

6. Of the 55 counties, 35 (64 percent) have a lower than average student population per square mile and are assigned a higher cost allowance (90 percent) for transportation.

7. Cost per pupil ranged from a low of $371 in Kanawha County to a high of $790 in Clay County.

8. Bus drivers in West Virginia earn double what drivers earn in North and South Carolina and Kentucky. Drivers are paid a full-time wage, but do not actually work 40 hours a week. In addition, drivers are paid extra-duty pay during their normal work day.

9. Salaries are not included with the transportation costs formula but are considered as part of funding for all service personnel.

10. There is essentially no incentive in the current funding formula. Consequently, there is little accountability to contain costs and no need to search continually for efficiencies — the current method does not challenge counties to do so.

Challenge West Virginia

Challenge West Virginia is a statewide organization committed to maintaining and improving small community schools and reforming education policy in West Virginia so that all of our state's children have the opportunity to receive a first-class education and the promise of a bright future.

The latest research indicates that children – especially low-income, at-risk children – have greater success in small, community-based schools. Unfortunately, boards of education across West Virginia have closed more than a quarter of our state's public schools during the past ten years. More than anything else, education policy has been guided by "economies of scale," a concept borrowed from industry, which has meant putting the maximum number of students in the minimum number of schools with the minimum number of teachers. What this has meant in practical terms is the loss of our state's smallest schools, a majority of which were located in its poorest communities.

Challenge members are convinced that changing public policy, keeping our community schools and helping parents become full partners in the education system are necessary if we are to realize a future where our children believe in themselves, value their communities and receive the best possible education.

Challenge WV is a program of Covenant House, an independent, non-profit organization in Charleston, WV.

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